

“Silent Way”---What it is

by George Ann Gregory

The term “Silent Way” comes from the principle of a lot of language and few words.²

Caleb Gattegno is its originator. “Gattegno believes that all human beings have enormous cognitive capabilities and that each individual is responsible for his/her own learning.”³ His commitment is to solving some of the problems of learning in general and “Silent Way” is a by-product of this.⁴ Here are some of his own ideas about learning.

- 1.) “Teaching should be subordinate to learning.”⁴ For this reason, the teacher says the utterance only the minimum number of times for a student or students to get it. The students do 90% (an estimate) or more of the talking.⁴
- 2.) “Learning is not primarily imitation or drill.”⁴ This statement parallels what is now believed about language acquisition.
- 3.) “In learning, rather, the mind ‘equips itself by its own working, trial and error, deliberate experimentation, by suspending judgment and revising conclusions.’”⁴ The students are encouraged to experiment with the language and to try new possibilities. For this reason, students are allowed to make mistakes.
- 4.) “As it works, the mind draws on everything it has already acquired, particularly including its experience of learning its native language. For Gattegno, “...the differences between first-and second-language learning loom larger than the similarities, so that he is content to devise an ‘artificial’ method rather than trying for a ‘natural’ one.”⁴
- 5.) The teacher must stop interfering with and sidetracking the student’s activity.⁴ For this reason, the teacher models and then remains silent so the student or students can get on with the business of learning.

6.) “The teacher provides knowledge of the language and a firm overall structure for activity.”⁴ This meets a part of the student’s need for security.

“Silent Way” uses a set of Cuisenaire rods, small wooden blocks of ten different lengths but identical cross-section with each length having its own distinctive color.⁴ Speech is accompanied by appropriate action, generally consisting of manipulation of the rods, and the action is accompanied by appropriate speech.

These are the beginning actions outlined by Gattegno.²

- 1.) The teacher picks up a rod and says the word for that plus the indefinite article if it exists in that language. He picks up another rod and utters the same word or words again. He does this 7 or 8 times. The students are to simply listen during this time.
 - 2.) The teacher indicates in mime that he wants the students to repeat. If there is no response, the teacher says the same word or words and asks in mime for the students to repeat.
 - 3.) The teacher introduces the names for 4 or 5 colors. He says “a green rod, a red rod, etc.”
 - 4.) The teacher indicates in mime that he wants the students to repeat. If there is no response, he says the same word or words and asks in mime for the students to repeat.
 - 5.) The teacher brings two students in front of the class. He tells one to “take a green rod.” If he gets an incorrect response, he says it again and puts the student’s hand on the correct colored rod and has him take it.
 - 6.) The teacher says to “give it to me.” If he gets an incorrect response, he says it again and puts the student’s hand on the rod and has the student give it to him.
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The teacher then goes through similar actions for “give it to her” and “give it to him”

The silence following the teacher’s modeling allows the students to analyze the data presented before they begin producing it. The rods are always in sight to act as a visual cue to trigger the student’s recall. The teacher uses student models whenever possible both for pronunciation and for the correct statement.

A first session might go something like this. There are ten students seated around a table. On the table are the rods. The teacher picks up a rod and says, “a rod.” He does this 7 or 8 times with different rods. The students are watching and listening during this time. He then takes a rod and presents it to the students indicating in mime that he wants them to repeat. All the students repeat “a rod.” He then presents the rod to one student at a time, eliciting the correct response through mime. The fifth student’s response is very poorly pronounced. He then goes back to the second student who produced it correctly and has that student say “a rod” again. He then goes back to the fifth student and has that student say “a rod” again. He continues with the remaining students. He continues in a similar manner for the other structures.

The only language used during the entire session is the language being taught, i.e. “a rod”, “a blue rod”, etc. All other actions are carried on through mime. For instance, one way to involve the students more is after the teacher has said the utterance or asked a question, he can have one student ask another. Students can also create their own situations to talk about. This can be done by the teacher handing the rods to a student or group of students and indicating in mime that he wants them to say something about the rods.

Its use and effectiveness

“Silent Way” has spread primarily by word of mouth for there is very little mention of it in the literature. While Gattegno does offer training in this methodology, most people who are currently using it got it second hand, usually from seeing a demonstration of it. Earl Stevick, who also got it second hand, has seen it used successfully with one student and with a class of 70.⁴ He has passed on what he knows of it to other teachers and seen them use it effectively. Stevick says, “Most recently, working in partnership with Turkish instructors who had no previous experience with the Silent Way, I took a beginning class through their first 150 hours, using little except rods and purposive silence.”⁴

Judy Rothman says, “...the Silent Way is catching on. People who were convinced that they couldn’t learn languages gain faith in themselves as learners after attending just one workshop or class. (There is something about the Silent Way that appeals to one’s cleverness: ‘Wow, I figured that out for myself—I’m so intelligent. What’s next?’)”³

“Silent Way” is not a perfect method for teaching languages. It is, however, a workable one. It is simple to use: It requires no elaborate preparation on the part of the teacher. It requires no elaborate or expensive props to make it work. It works because it involves the student in learning: It consults his understanding, not insults his intelligence.

There is one more interesting phenomena which often occurs with learning a language “Silent Way.” That is that the student learns the words for concepts and ideas he already has instead of learning new words for old ones. The concepts or ideas are

already there. They are symbolized differently in different languages. In the case of “Silent Way” the student learns new symbols for concepts he already has.

One reason the rods work with this method better than other objects is that they carry very little inherent significance. A lamp, a table, a dog, all carries connotations other than the fact that they are real objects. These connotations draw the student’s attention away from the structures being taught. For instance, if the object being used is an orange, the student is likely to think of eating and perhaps even get hungry. Whereas with the rods, the student can focus his full attention on what the teacher is doing and saying.

HAND SIGNALS⁵

1. Stop or quiet: two hands, finger upward, palms facing class.
2. Listen: One hand cupped behind the ear.
3. Repeat: One or two hands beckoning toward the teacher.
4. Answer or respond: Whole hand, palm upward, pointed at the student.
5. Expand (into a phrase or sentence): Palms of hands together and then both hands moved vertically apart.
6. Open hand, palm facing the teacher, fingers upward and spread apart. Starting with the little finger, each finger “stands for” a word in a sentence. This can be used to help isolate a student’s problem, used to show inversion of word order, etc.² For example, the student forgets to say the verb which is the third word in the sentence. The student was suppose to say “the rod is green” but had actually said “the rod green.” The teacher indicates he wants the student to respond again. As the student responds, the teacher beginning with the little finger points to each finger consecutively for each word. When the student gets to the third word and says “green,” the teacher shakes his head “no” and points emphatically to the third finger. This indicates to the student that the problem lies there with the third word. If this fails to illicit a correct response, the teacher has another student give him the third word “is.” Only as a very last resort does the teacher give the student the correct word. Using his fingers, the teacher has the student say the entire sentence correctly.²

UNIT	ITEM	INSTRUCTIONS
1	a rod	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up a rod and says, "a rod." He picks up another and utters the same words again. He does this 7 or 8 times. The teacher indicated he wants the students to repeat. The teacher pauses and observes the students, allowing the students to respond. If after this "silence" there is no response, he says "a rod" again and indicates he want the students to repeat.
2	A <u>color</u> rod Black Brown Blue Pink	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher rubs his finger along the rod to indicate the color and says, "a blue rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. The teacher pauses and observes the students, allowing the students to respond. If after this "silence" there is no response, he says the phrase again and indicates he wants the students to repeat. He does this for all four colors.
3	Take a <u>color</u> rod	The teacher brings 2 students in front of the class. He tells one to "take a blue rod." If he gets an incorrect response, he says it again and puts the student's hand on the correct colored rod and has him take it. The teacher indicates he wants the students to repeat. He does this for all four colors.
4	Give it to me. (him, her, them, us)	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher tells the student holding the rod "give it to me." If he gets an incorrect response, he says it again and puts his hand on the student's hand and moves the student's hand and rod toward himself. He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He tells one of the students to "take a <u>color</u> rod." He tells that student to "give it to her/him," indicating the other student with his hand. If he gets an incorrect response, he says it again and puts his hand on the student's and moves that student's hand with the rod toward the other student. The teacher indicates he wants the students to repeat. He does this with him, her them, and us.
5	Green Yellow Red Orange	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up a rod and says, "a green rod." He indicates he wants the student to repeat. He does this for all four colors.

UNIT	ITEM	INSTRUCTIONS
6	This, that	<p>Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher places one (blue) rod near him and one (blue) rod far from him. Indicating the near one, he says, "That is a (blue) rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. Indicating the far one, he says, "That is a (blue) rod." He indicates he wants to students to repeat. Indicating the near one and the far one randomly, he asks in mime several students to respond. If he gets an incorrect response, he repeats the original demonstration.</p>
7	<p>What is this? What is that?</p>	<p>The teacher picks up a rod and asks a student, "What is this?" If he gets an incorrect response, he asks another student. He uses his fingers to prompt a correct response. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "What is this?" He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He then places a rod at some distance from himself and the students and repeats the above procedure for "What is that?"</p>
8	It's a <u>color</u> rod.	<p>Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up a <u>color</u> rod and says, "It's a <u>color</u> rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He asks a student, "What is this?" If he gets the response "This is a <u>color</u> rod", he indicates using his fingers that "it's" is substituted for "this is." The teacher then has the student say, "It's a <u>color</u> rod." The teacher asks several students, "What is this?", eliciting both the new and the old response to show the students that both responses are correct.</p>
9	<p>What are these? (those?)</p> <p>These (Those) are _____.</p>	<p>The teacher picks up two rods of the same color and he asks a student who is close to him, "What are these?" Using his fingers, he prompts the student to say "These are <u>color</u> rods." The teacher repeats the demonstration with 3, 4, or more rods of the same color. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "What are these?" He indicates he wants the students to repeat. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "These are <u>color</u> rods." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. The teacher then takes two rods of the same color and places them at some distance from himself and the students. He then goes through the same steps for "What are those?"</p>

UNIT	ITEM	INSTRUCTIONS
10	They're <u>color</u> rods.	<p>Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up several rods of the same color and says, "they're color rods." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. The teacher asks a student, "What are these?" If he gets the response "These are" or "Those are <u>color</u> rods.", using his fingers the teacher indicates that "they're" is substituted for "these are" or "those are." He then elicits "they're <u>color</u> rods." He does this with several students. The teachers asks several students, "What are these (those)?", eliciting both the new and the old response to show the students that both responses are correct.</p>
11	<p>Where is the <u>color</u> rod?</p> <p>Where are the <u>color</u> rods?</p> <p>(It's) They're here. (there) the</p>	<p>The teacher indicates he wants the students to listen. Indicating a rod near him, he says, "It's here." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He repeats the above procedure for "It's there." Placing a rod near a student, he asks, "Where is the <u>color</u> rod?" If he gets an incorrect response, he re-models "here" and "there." He asks several students. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "Where is the <u>color</u> rod?" He indicates he wants the students to repeat. Placing several rods of the same color near a student, he asks, "Where are the <u>color</u> rods?" If he gets an incorrect response, he models, "They're here." He asks several students. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "Where are the <u>color</u> rods?" He indicates he wants the students to repeat. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "They're here." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He uses the above procedure for "They're there."</p>

UNIT	ITEM	INSTRUCTIONS
12	Behind Under Near On top of In front of Beside Between	<p>The teacher places a blue rod behind a brown rod. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he asks, "Where is the blue rod?" Still indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "It's behind (picking up the blue rod and replacing it behind the brown rod) the brown rod (indicating the brown rod)." He goes through the above demonstration with several other combinations of colors. He says, "It's behind the brown rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat.</p> <p>Placing a blue rod behind a brown rod, he asks a student, "Where is the blue rod?" If he gets an incorrect response, he prompts the student by using his fingers. He does this with several different students and combinations of rods. The teacher repeats the above procedure for the remaining words (under, near, on top of, in front of, beside, and between). The teacher uses the above procedure for "Where are the <u>color</u> rods?" and They're _____."</p>
13	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	<p>Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up a rod and says, "1." He picks up 2 rods and says, "2." He picks up another rod and says, "3." He picks up another rod and says, "4." He picks up another rod and says, "5." Holding 1 rod, he says, "1." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He does this with all 5 numbers.</p>
14	How many rods are there? There are _____.	<p>Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up a number of rods and says, "There are <u>no.</u> rods." The teacher picks up a different number of rods and says, "There are <u>no.</u> rods." He does this several times and then indicates he wants the students to repeat. Taking a number of rods, he asks a student, "How many rods are there?" If he gets an incorrect response, he uses his fingers to prompt the student. He does this with several different students. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "How many rods are there?" He indicates he wants the students to repeat.</p>

UNIT	ITEM	INSTRUCTIONS
15	6, 7, 8, 9, 10	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up six rods and says, "6." He does the same for the numbers 7, 8, 9, and 10. Picking up six rods, he says, "6." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He has the students repeat the remaining numbers in the same manner.
16	Last First Second Third Fourth Fifth Give me (her, us, him, them) the last (first, second, third, fourth, fifth) rod.	The teacher arranges some rods in a row. He brings a student to the front. Pointing to the "last" rod, he says, "Give me the last rod." If he gets an incorrect response, he repeats the phrase and places the student's hand on the last rod and has the student give it to him. The teacher uses the same procedure for first, second, third, fourth, and fifth. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "Give me the last rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. The teacher uses the same repetition procedure for the other words.
17	It's my (her, his, your, our, their) rod. Whose rod is it? They're my (her, his, your, our, their) rods. Whose rods are they?	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up a rod, points to himself, and says, "It's my rod." He does this several times. The teacher gives a rod to a student and indicates he wants the student to utter the phrase. He does this with several different students. The teacher goes through the above procedure for each possessive. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "It's my rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He does this with each possessive adjective. The teacher picks up a rod and asks a student, "Whose rod is it?" If he gets an incorrect response, he uses his fingers to prompt the student. He does this with several different students and with several different possessives. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "Whose rod is it?" He indicates he wants the students to listen. He uses the above procedure for the plural forms.
18	It's mine (his, yours, ours, theirs, hers). They're mine (his, yours, ours, hers, theirs).	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up a rod, points to himself and says, "It's mine." Using his fingers, he indicates that "mine" can be substituted for "my rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He uses the above procedure for all possessives and for the plural phrase.

UNIT	ITEM	INSTRUCTIONS
19	I, you, we, they, he, she, it	<p>The teacher brings two students to the front of the class (1 male and 1 female if possible). Indicating he wants the students to listen, he points to himself and says, "I." Coming close to one of the students, looking directly at that student, and pointing with his hand, he says, "you." Still looking at that student, he points at the other student and says, "he (she)." (These students are placed so the other students are able to see the above demonstration.) Indicating himself and the two students, he looks at the two students and says, "we." Still looking at the two students, he points at the remaining students and says, "they." He has the two students sit down. Touching different objects, he says "it" as he touches each one. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "I." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He has the students repeat each pronoun.</p>
20	<p>(present progressive)</p> <p>I am giving you the blue rod.</p>	<p>The teacher brings a student to the front of the class. He has the student extend a hand, palm up. He picks up a rod and indicates he wants the students to listen. He faces the students. While he is passing the rod to the student, he says, "I am giving you the blue rod." The teacher repeats the demonstration. The teacher has the student give him the rod while the student is saying, "I am giving you the blue rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He brings another student to the front. He has one student give the rod to the other while the teacher says to the remaining students, "He (she) is giving her (him) the blue rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat while he has the two students re-do the demonstration. (It is important that the saying of the phrase occurs at the same time the action does.) The teacher demonstrates "they are ____.", "you are ____.", and "we are ____.", in the same manner. (Note: this structure lends itself to many substitutions and the students should be encouraged in their group practice to make as many as possible.)</p>

UNIT	ITEM	INSTRUCTIONS
21	(past) I gave her a blue rod.	The teacher brings a student to the front of the class. He gives her a rod. Indicating he wants the student to listen, he says, "I gave her a blue rod." He repeats the demonstration. He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He has the student return to her seat. (Note: this structure lends itself to many substitutions and the teacher should have the students use as many as possible during their practice times.)
22	(future) I will give her a blue rod.	The teacher brings a student to the front of the class. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he picks up a rod and says, "I will give her (him) a blue rod." He pauses then gives her (him) the rod. He repeats the demonstration. He indicates he wants the students to repeat. (Note: this structure lends itself to many substitutions and the teacher should have the students use as many as possible during their practice times.)
23	Is it a blue rod? Yes, it is. No, it isn't.	The teacher brings a student to the front of the class. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he picks up a blue rod and asks the student, "Is it a blue rod?" Switching to the student's side, he says, "Yes, it is." Switching back to his original position, he asks the student, "Is it a blue rod?" He indicates he wants the student to respond. If he gets an incorrect response, he re-models. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he picks up a red rod and asks, "Is it a blue rod?" Switching to the student's side, he says, "No, it isn't." Switching back to his original position, he asks the student, "Is it a blue rod?" He indicates he wants the student to respond. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "Is it a blue rod?" He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He has the students repeat "Yes, it is." and "No, it isn't."
24	What color is it? What color are they?	Picking up a rod, the teacher asks a student, "What color is it?" If he gets an incorrect response, he uses his fingers to prompt the student. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "What color is it?" He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He uses this same procedure for "What color are they?" (Note: this can be expanded to "What colors are they?" to teach "and.")

UNIT	ITEM	INSTRUCTIONS
25	Or	Picking up a blue rod, the teacher asks a student, "Is it blue or red?" If he gets an incorrect response, he models, "It's blue." He repeats the demonstration with several different colors. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "Is it blue or red?" He indicates he wants the students to repeat.
26	Long Short Which is the ____ rod?	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher picks up a long rod and says, "long." Picking up another long rod of a different color, he says, "long." He does this several times. He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He repeats the above demonstration with "short." The teacher takes one long rod and one short rod and asks a student, "Which is the long rod?" If he gets an incorrect response, he re-models "long" and "short." He does this with several different students. Indicating he wants the students to listen, he says, "Which is the short rod?" He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He has the students repeat "Which is the long rod?" (Note: there are different possible responses for this question and the students should use as many as possible during practice times. This should also be expanded to include "Which are the ____ rods?")
27	Longer Shorter	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher takes two rods of different colors. Holding them up, he says, "The red rod is shorter than the blue rod." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. The teacher does this with 4 or 5 examples. He repeats the above procedure with "longer."
28	Longest Shortest	Indicating he wants the students to listen, the teacher takes some rods of different lengths. Pointing to the longest, he says, "This is the longest." He repeats this demonstration several times with different combinations of rods. He says, "This is the longest." He indicates he wants the students to repeat. He repeats the above procedure with "shortest."

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References

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